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It's Not Your Grandmother's School: Leadership Decisions in RTI

By Sally Whitelock

“This is not your grandmother’s school,” commented George Batsche, who was visiting our school with a team of RTI researchers and staff from the Renaissance Company. It was validating to hear that experts in RTI who consulted across the country considered the data team process, intervention system, curriculum, and assessment practices that we had put into place to be of high quality. As a practicing school psychologist and administrator at Brown International Academy, an inner city elementary school in Denver Public Schools, I believe strongly that if the RTI model is put into practice, it will greatly impact educational outcomes for all students.

Putting RTI into practice is not easy—it is not your grandmother’s school. It requires us to think differently and to ask different questions. RTI is not simply about special education; it is about ensuring that students receive quality instruction using research-based interventions prior to being identified as learning disabled. RTI is school reform. It is about ensuring that schools create structures and use teaching resources that effectively meet the needs of all students. It is about the way that schools use screening, formative, progress monitoring, diagnostic, and summative assessments to ensure that instruction is differentiated and that interventions are implemented for all students not demonstrating proficient levels of achievement. It is about schools ensuring that they are using a guaranteed and viable core curriculum for all students and that students below proficient are instructed with research-based interventions. RTI is about data driven dialogues that provide teachers opportunities to collaborate about data driven instruction on the group and individual level. And, lastly, RTI is about identifying students with specific learning disabilities who fail to respond to research-based interventions, implemented with fidelity, based on progress monitoring data.

School leadership teams need to consider four major components when moving to a fully functioning RTI model that meets the needs of all students in the school. School teams must consider school structures and use of teaching resources, implementation of core and intervention curriculums, use of a variety of assessment tools, and facilitation of data driven dialogues.

School Structures and Use of Teaching Resources

Historically, teachers have had the autonomy to teach their grade level or content area based on their knowledge of content and standards. Teachers have been responsible only to their classroom of students.

In an RTI model, however, school reform efforts challenge the school and each teacher to “open their doors” and to be collectively responsible for the learning of all students in the school. In order for RTI to be implemented effectively, school leadership teams must, therefore, examine their school structures.

School leaders must ask themselves:

- How will we schedule classroom teachers, intervention teachers, special education teachers, and other teaching resources to ensure that all students receive core, grade-level instruction?
- How can we schedule teachers to ensure that all students who are below academic proficiency receive interventions?
- How can we schedule teachers to ensure that we are challenging students above proficiency in grade-level standards?
- Who will teach Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to students?
- How will the budget support the necessary instructional resources?

Core Curriculum and Research-Based Interventions

The standards-based educational reform movement of the 1990s helped to establish national and state standards or benchmark proficiency levels that students are expected to achieve at each grade level. This movement helped educators across the nation increase educational rigor and informed curriculum developers. In addition, the standards-based movement, along with technological advancements in education, pushed teachers to engage students more in learning, communicate learning goals to students, provide specific feedback to students regarding their learning, and assess students in relation to a benchmark. The RTI model requires education systems to go one step further: ensure that the core curriculum is not only “guaranteed and viable,” which has a strong correlation with academic achievement (Marzano, 2000), but also that core curriculum and intervention curriculums are research-based.

Research indicates that approximately 38% of fourth-grade students and up to 70% of poor students, often minority students who live in urban or isolated settings, demonstrate inadequate reading skills (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). However, studies have indicated that an emphasis on both classroom instruction and targeted interventions can result in all but 2–5% of children learning basic reading skills in first grade (Mathes et al., 2005). In addition, older students who struggle with reading can also become proficient readers if the remediation is intensive, expert, and long-term (Torgesen et al., 2001). According to Batsche and colleagues (2005), “research-based, scientifically validated interventions/instruction provide our best shot at implementing strategies that will be effective for a large majority of students.”

School leaders, therefore, must evaluate their current instructional program and ask themselves:

- Do all students in our school have access to grade-level, core curriculum that is “guaranteed and viable,” as well as research-based? If not, what changes are necessary in core curriculum to ensure that a research-based, guaranteed, and viable curriculum is offered at grade level to all children in reading, writing, and mathematics?
- Are there research-based intervention resources available for students in need of Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in reading and mathematics? If not, what intervention resources is the school going to implement?

- Are teachers trained effectively in the core curriculum and the intervention curriculums in order to instruct the curriculum with fidelity while also differentiating appropriately?

Screening, Summative, Formative, Progress Monitoring, and Diagnostic Assessments

Assessments have been used for a long time in educational settings to evaluate student learning, identify students for special education, and evaluate school effectiveness. However, in an RTI model that meets the needs of all students, educators are required to use assessment tools to:

- Identify students at risk of reading or mathematics failure (screening).
- Inform instructional decisions (progress monitoring and formative assessments).
- Determine if students below proficient are closing the achievement gap with their peers who are demonstrating proficient achievement (progress monitoring).
- Determine if interventions are successful and if students are responding to interventions (progress monitoring).
- Determine if the student has significant areas of weakness that are interfering with the student's ability to learn (diagnostic).
- Determine if students have learned the required educational standards (summative).
- Determine if the students in the school are achieving proficient levels of learning (summative/high stakes testing).

Therefore, it is not enough for a school to develop a systematic, three-tiered structure and to provide instruction using research-based core and intervention curriculums. Schools must also have effective assessment tools to support instructional decision-making. In addition, schools have external assessment requirements, placed on them by the state or district, which they must adhere to, but which may or may not support them in impacting learning.

School instructional staffs, therefore, need to become adept in administering, interpreting, and analyzing a multitude of assessments. School leadership teams may also need to identify additional assessment tools to support decision making in an RTI model. School teams must ask themselves:

- Do we have a quick, valid, reliable, predictive screening assessment that can identify students at risk of academic failure? When and how are we administering this tool? Are we using this data to place students in intervention groups?
- Do we use data to inform instructional decisions? What data do we use? How do we use this data to differentiate instruction in the classroom to ensure that all students are learning?
- Do we have progress monitoring assessments that are quick, sensitive to progress in the short term, predictive, valid, and reliable? Do we use this data to determine if students are responding to interventions? If students are not responding to interventions, do we adjust the intervention? Do we use this data to support special education identification?
- Do we have diagnostic assessments that support us in making instructional decisions for students who are receiving interventions but not making adequate progress? Do we use this information to support changes in instruction? Do we use this data to support special education identification?
- Do we have summative assessment data that supports grade level and school-wide decision making? Do we analyze this data for grade-level and school-wide strengths and weaknesses? Do we use this data to make professional development decisions for our school? Do we use this data to support the development of school improvement plans?

Data Driven Dialogues

In RTI practice, decisions are based on the judgment of professionals informed directly by student

achievement data (Batsche et al., 2005). There have been several models for data driven decision making, including a problem solving model (Batsche, 2006), setting challenging goals and effective feedback (Marzano, 2003), data-driven dialogue (Wellman & Lipton, 2004), and others. The school reform effort means that school professionals collaboratively look at data to identify students in need of interventions, inform instruction, differentiate in the classroom, and identify students for special education. Schools who implement core and intervention curriculums with fidelity while also differentiating based on student performance data ensure that all students learn.

Since data driven dialogues are relatively new to education reform efforts, most teachers are not trained in how to interpret data and differentiate instruction informed by data. Therefore, school leadership teams need to consider the following:

- How are summative and high-stakes testing data discussed within the school?
- Does the school collaboratively interpret data and use it to design school improvement plans?
- How is summative testing data discussed and analyzed at the grade or content level? Is data used to determine power standards, overall strengths, and overall weaknesses? Is this data used to make class-wide instructional decisions? Is it used to identify target groups of students?
- How is screening data used? Is it used to identify intervention groups?
- How is progress monitoring and formative assessment data used? Is there a process to problem solve for individual students who are not making adequate progress? How are decisions about changing interventions made?
- What is the protocol for data driven dialogues? Have teachers been trained in interpreting and analyzing data? Have teachers been trained to make SMART goals and action plans that inform instruction? Is there a culture of collaboration that supports teachers in learning from each other?

Case Study: The RTI Model at Brown International

At Brown International Academy, we systematically put an RTI model into place in the school. As we implemented the model, we consistently improved upon the four components listed above. We considered the school schedule/structure and teaching resources, the core and intervention curriculums, the assessment tools used, and the data driven decision making process. School teams, especially in schools with high numbers of at-risk students, need to simultaneously consider each of these components.

We strategically developed a “flooding model,” in which we flooded grade levels with teacher resources during small group reading instruction and math instruction. In order to achieve this, we used the school special education teachers and hired intervention teachers to support reading and math intervention, thus ensuring three tiers of instruction/interventions. A master schedule was developed in order to use the special education (Tier 3) and intervention (Tier 2) teachers effectively. The master schedule provided the following:

- Classroom teachers who provided small group instruction and independent practice for all partially proficient, proficient, and advanced students, thus ensuring that all students were challenged at their instructional level.
- Special education teachers who provided 1 hour daily of direct instruction with a research-based intervention curriculum to students in need of Tier 3 interventions.
- Intervention teachers who provided 1 hour daily of direct instruction with a research-based intervention curriculum to students in need of Tier 2 interventions in reading and math.
- Grade level core curriculum in reading, writing, and science/social studies daily to all students in

the grade level (no students were removed from core instruction to receive intervention support).

In a school setting, it is often impractical to make several significant changes in curriculum in one year. Therefore, the first step was to implement a core curriculum in reading and math and then in writing. Next, the school trained special education teachers and intervention teachers in research-based interventions. Since research-based interventions should be implemented with fidelity, we chose a small number of interventions and trained teachers sufficiently. The following curriculums are used:

- Core curriculum for all students: Reading—Open Court and Accelerated Reader; Writing—Writing Alive; Math—Everyday Math
- Tier 2 interventions: Reading—Six Minute Solutions, Corrective Reading, KPALS; Math—Larson math/iSucceed computer math program, Number Worlds Tier 2
- Tier 3 interventions: Reading—Wilson, Foundations; Math—Larson math/iSucceed computer math program, Number Worlds Tier 3.
- As successes occurred or weaknesses were determined, we continued to examine resources for our school. Currently, the school is working with Renaissance Company to pilot Math Facts in a Flash and Accelerated Math.

In Denver Public Schools, we are required to administer several assessments every year. The state assessment, the Colorado Student Assessment Program, is required for all 3rd–5th grade students in reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, all 2nd–5th graders are required to complete the district benchmark assessment in reading, writing, and mathematics. Lastly, the district requires the DRA2 to be administered to all K–5th grade students as a yearly reading assessment. Brown uses all three assessments as summative assessments and determines school-wide and grade-level goals based on this data. In addition, the leadership team at Brown determined that additional assessments were needed to identify students at risk of academic failure. Thus, the DIBELS, STAR Early Literacy, STAR, and STAR math are given three times per year to all students. The greatest value of these assessment measures is that they are predictive of academic success and sensitive to change. Therefore, these assessment tools are also used for progress monitoring of students in intervention groups. Lastly, the school uses Accelerated Reader quizzes and classroom based assessments as formative assessments to ensure that all students are learning the learning objectives.

At the center of our RTI model, however, is our data team process and our student intervention team process. At Brown International, the administrators meet weekly with each grade level team to review assessment data, interpret and analyze data, identify possible explanations of the data, develop SMART goals, and develop action plans for target groups of students. A 6-week rotation was created in which the teams spend 2 weeks discussing reading, 2 weeks discussing writing, and 2 weeks discussing math. A 6-week action plan for each content area is created each rotation. This collaborative discussion challenges teachers to instruct the core curriculum while also differentiating based on the current achievement data. If individual students continue to struggle to learn necessary skills even after the action plan is implemented for the target groups of students, then the student is referred to the student intervention team. At student intervention team meetings, a problem solving approach occurs in which the problem is identified, an intervention plan is developed, and a progress monitoring plan is established. It is through the data team

process and student intervention team process that the instructional team at Brown International ensures that all students receive the instruction necessary to learn. However, without the schedule, curriculum, and assessment tools in place, the data team process would not be able to occur.

Summary

Implementation of RTI is a school reform effort. Change is challenging. However, implementation of RTI as reform in the inner cities, with high numbers of students at risk of academic failure and school drop out, provides even more challenges. Through strategic, systematic, school-wide efforts, however, it can be done. School leadership teams can ensure that all children learn and that all children have a multitude of opportunities as they grow up in our education system. School leadership teams must ask the difficult questions and make the difficult changes to ensure that all students learn.

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